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Committee on Oversight and Accountability

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“Reforming the WHO: Ensuring Global Health Security and Accountability”

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Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Ruiz, and Members of the Subcommittee, it is an honor to be with you today on behalf of the Department of State to discuss the U.S. government’s commitment to strengthen global health security to protect the American people. We engage internationally at all levels – bilaterally, regionally, and multilaterally with international organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO).

I come before you today representing the State Department’s newest bureau, the Bureau of Global Health Security and Diplomacy, which was launched on August 1 of this year. I would like to thank members of Congress for their support to establish this Bureau.

The COVID-19 pandemic left a deep, lasting impact on all of us – with more than 1 million American lives lost and an at least 7 million globally. One estimate found that the American economy lost more than \$14 trillion due to the pandemic and economists estimate global GDP contracted by 3% in 2020. The last few years have reinforced that a pandemic is not only a health crisis. It’s an economic crisis, and it’s a national security crisis.

Without the combined leadership of the U.S., multilateral partners, including the WHO, and others, the world may not yet have successfully made it out of the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. The coordinated global effort required to deploy COVID-19 vaccines around the world was a major demonstration of this lesson. A coalition of countries, including the United States, came together with the WHO to support the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access initiative, referred to as COVAX. The United States, in partnership with COVAX and bilaterally, has donated nearly 689 million safe and effective vaccines to 117 countries and economies around the world - while simultaneously investing in regional vaccine manufacturing, supporting health workers, and strengthening our capacity to prevent, detect, and respond to COVID-19 and future global health threats. Under Secretary Blinken's leadership, the State Department continues to play a critical role in elevating Global Health Security as a major priority in high-level global and regional political dialogues.

Our team at the Bureau of Global Health Security and Diplomacy is focused on collaborating across the U.S. interagency community and with Congress to do all that we can to mitigate future threats. Unfortunately, it's not a question of "if" a new health threat will emerge— it's a matter of "when." The world needs greater cooperation, coordination, collaboration, and communication.

One core element of the Bureau on Global Health Security and Diplomacy's mission is to lead American diplomacy and support programmatic efficiency to strengthen the global health security architecture. A major priority continues to be ending HIV/AIDS as a public health threat by 2030 and in that spirit, I look forward to working with you – in continued strong bipartisan fashion – to pass a clean five-year PEPFAR reauthorization.

It also includes working closely with our interagency colleagues and our partners to reform existing organizations like the WHO that play a central role in the global health security architecture. This administration is firmly committed to ensuring the WHO implements a comprehensive set of organizational reforms, particularly to strengthen its governance, budgetary and financial management processes and improve oversight to strengthen the organization's efficiency and effectiveness.

In spite of the challenges it has faced, the WHO has a critical role to play in advancing global health security priorities as the lead global coordinator of the world's response to health emergencies and in promoting healthier lives worldwide. One of the most powerful examples of this is in HIV/AIDS. As you know, the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) has helped to save more than 25 million lives from HIV/AIDS over the past 20 years. The WHO's leadership in developing evidence-based guidance and policies for combatting HIV/AIDS has been critical for enhancing our own diplomatic efforts when working with partner countries to advance their respective HIV/AIDS responses.

The Bureau of Global Health Security and Diplomacy and the Biden-Harris Administration are committed to laying a strong foundation for timely and effective international coordination to prevent, detect, and respond to future disease threats. This means the United States will continue to provide leadership in the negotiations at the WHO to amend the International Health Regulations and develop the Pandemic Agreement. Through these negotiations we are focused on prioritizing the safety and wellbeing of the American people, which requires strong international cooperation and U.S. leadership to safeguard both national and global security.

The United States must play a leadership role to ensure the WHO is reformed to effectively address current and future global health challenges.

We have engaged in the Agile Member States Task Group on strengthening WHO's Budgetary, Programmatic, and Financing Governance (AMSTG). In consultation with this Task Group, the WHO Secretariat developed an implementation plan focused on critical reforms endorsed by Member States. The Implementation Plan, which builds on many past reforms and gap analyses in audits and external evaluations, includes a comprehensive set of 96 actions that are strictly within the Secretariat's authority to implement. Of these, approximately 70% have already been implemented, with the remaining to be implemented by 2025.

The United States also actively works to ensure that key WHO Regional Director positions are appropriately filled and we are working closely with likeminded partners to promote Taiwan's increased participation in the WHO moving forward. We will continue to engage directly with WHO leadership to ensure that the principles of good governance, accountability, transparency, and effectiveness are kept foremost in mind at all levels of WHO.

Thank you, Chairman Wenstrup and Ranking Member Ruiz for the opportunity to testify on this important topic.

I look forward to your questions.